The New Gravity

By Ervin Kosch

Marcus didn't need the Bureau of Labor Statistics to tell him about the economy. He had the cereal aisle at the Jewel-Osco on Elston Avenue.

He stood in front of the brightly colored boxes, a mental calculator running quietly behind his eyes. On the news that morning, a talking head in a sharp suit had cheerfully announced that headline inflation had "cooled" to a manageable rate. The panic was over, the anchor implied. The peak had passed.

But Marcus was looking at a box of honey nut O's. It wasn't that the price had jumped fifty cents this week—it hadn't. It was that the price was still $6.79, exactly where it had landed after the violent hikes of the previous few years. And the box was two ounces lighter than it used to be.

The baseline had shifted. The mountain had been climbed, and instead of walking back down, everyone was just expected to live on the plateau.

"See anything good?"

Marcus turned to find his wife, Elena, wheeling their grocery cart toward him. Their seven-year-old daughter, Maya, was dangling her legs from the child seat, intensely focused on a small plastic toy she'd found in a coat pocket—a purple horse missing one ear that she'd been carrying around for weeks with the devoted loyalty children extend to broken things.

"Just marveling at the new normal," Marcus said, tossing a generic store-brand box into the cart instead. "According to the TV, we should be celebrating because things are getting expensive at a slower rate."

Elena let out a dry, localized laugh—the kind shared by roughly 70% of American families who were still white-knuckling their monthly budgets. "Tell that to our landlord. Did you see the new lease notice? Up another four percent. They called it a 'market adjustment.'"

"Everything is an adjustment," Marcus muttered.

They kept moving down the aisle, practicing the modern art of defensive shopping. It was a dance of substitutions. Fresh berries were swapped for frozen bags; the good coffee beans were left on the shelf in favor of a massive, vacuum-sealed tub that tasted mostly like morning utility. The compounding math of the last three years had eroded their quiet financial buffers.

Marcus worked as a logistics coordinator near O'Hare, managing the movement of things he would never be able to afford—luxury electronics, high-end appliances, the implied possibility of ease. Elena managed a community health clinic in Logan Square, where she spent her days

advocating for patients who had even less cushion than they did. They made decent money. They were exactly the type of middle-class family that used to feel secure. Now, every trip to the register felt like a mild interrogation.

In the snack aisle, Maya looked up from her toy horse and pointed at a bag of the cheddar crackers she loved, the ones shaped like little fish. Marcus hesitated for only a moment—barely a breath—before setting the bag in the cart. Some things weren't negotiable. Elena glanced at him over Maya's head and gave a small nod, a wordless agreement made in the private language of parents.

When they reached the checkout, the conveyor belt pulled their life forward: milk, bread, eggs, a pack of chicken breasts, frozen vegetables, a single treat for Maya.

The cashier scanned the final item with a practiced, rhythmic beep. "That'll be $142.18."

Marcus blinked. It looked like a receipt from a wholesale club, but the cart was barely half full. He tapped his debit card against the reader, watching the green light flash with a faint sense of relief that was immediately swallowed by the thought of the upcoming utility bill.

They walked to the parking lot in that particular grocery store silence—not uncomfortable, just full. Maya skipped ahead to the car, her plastic horse cantering invisible terrain, leaving Marcus and Elena to carry the weight at a slower pace.

Driving home under the shadow of the Kennedy Expressway, the city felt massive and expensive. Chicago was a town built on muscle and industry, but lately the friction of simply existing in it felt higher. Gasoline prices were creeping up again, and the local news was running segments on how area restaurants were struggling because families were cutting out the simple luxury of a weekend dinner away from home. Marcus thought about the Thai place on Milwaukee that he and Elena used to hit on Friday nights, before Friday nights became a budget line.

Elena looked out the passenger window as they crossed over the North Branch of the Chicago River. "My mom called yesterday. She tried to buy her usual structural onions for her soup recipe—the ones that used to be a dollar a bag. She said she spent ten minutes looking at the receipt in the parking lot, trying to figure out if the store had made a mistake."

"It's not a mistake," Marcus said, keeping his eyes on the brake lights ahead. "It's just the new gravity."

From the back seat, Maya announced that her horse was named Violet now and that Violet was very fast and could jump over buildings. Marcus felt something loosen in his chest.

"Faster than the car?" he asked.

"Way faster," Maya said, with complete authority.

They pulled into the alley behind their apartment building. Marcus grabbed three heavy plastic bags in each hand, the handles cutting into his fingers—a physical manifestation of the weight everyone was carrying.

Inside the kitchen, Maya ran off to the living room to build a fort out of sofa cushions, entirely oblivious to the micro-economics unfolding on the linoleum counter. Marcus and Elena stood side by side, unpacking the groceries in the careful, companionable way of two people who had learned to operate in close quarters without collision.

Elena held up a block of cheddar cheese. "Remember when this was three bucks?"

"Vaguely," Marcus said. "I think it was around the same time we talked about saving up for a down payment on a house."

The comment hung in the air, a little heavier than intended. They hadn't talked about buying a house in eighteen months. The dream hadn't died; it had simply been priced out of their immediate reality, shelved alongside the premium coffee and the spontaneous weekend trips they used to take to Michigan—nothing extravagant, just a cabin rental and a couple of days without the city pressing in on all sides.

Elena set the cheese in the refrigerator drawer and turned to him, leaning against the counter. She reached out and caught his hand, her thumb tracing the back of his knuckles—a gesture so habitual it had become a kind of punctuation, a way of marking the end of one sentence before beginning another.

"Hey. We're doing okay. We're paying the bills. We're keeping the heat on."

"I know," Marcus said, offering a genuine if tired smile. "We're surviving the cooling trend."

"Exactly. One store-brand cereal box at a time."

Marcus laughed and pulled her in for a brief, quiet hug. She smelled like the cold outside and the faint citrus of her hand lotion, and for a moment the kitchen was very small and very sufficient.

From the living room, Maya called out with great urgency that her fort needed a blanket from the hall closet and that it was an emergency. Elena pulled back, eyes bright, and went to assist with the crisis.

Marcus finished putting the groceries away alone, moving through the familiar choreography of their refrigerator. He put the eggs on the second shelf, the milk beside them, the frozen vegetables in the drawer that always stuck a little. He folded the plastic bags and tucked them in the cabinet under the sink.

The headline numbers on the evening news would continue to fluctuate, flashing red or green depending on the whims of global supply chains and federal interest rates. Analysts would

argue about core versus headline, seasonally adjusted versus nominal. People in sharp suits would explain why the trend was actually encouraging, if you understood how to read it properly.

But here in the kitchen, the math was simpler. It was about balance and resilience, about spending carefully and laughing anyway, about a seven-year-old who named her broken toy horse Violet and believed without question that she could jump over buildings. Marcus stood for a moment in the quiet before the chaos of bedtime, listening to his daughter issue architectural instructions from the living room and his wife negotiating the terms of blanket deployment.

The plateau was real. The weight was real. But so was this.

He turned off the kitchen light and went to help build the fort.